

**“Love’s Extravagance”**  
**March 13, 2016**  
**Eastminster Presbyterian Church**  
**Rev. Jeanne S. Simpson**

**Isaiah 43:1-3a, 18-19**

But now thus says the LORD,

he who created you, O Jacob,

he who formed you, O Israel:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

<sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

<sup>18</sup>Do not remember the former things,

or consider the things of old.

<sup>19</sup>I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness

and rivers in the desert.

## John 12:1-11

Six days before the Passover Jesus came to Bethany, the home of Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>2</sup> There they gave a dinner for him. Martha served, and Lazarus was one of those at the table with him. <sup>3</sup> Mary took a pound of costly perfume made of pure nard, anointed Jesus' feet, and wiped them with her hair. The house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume. <sup>4</sup> But Judas Iscariot, one of his disciples (the one who was about to betray him), said, <sup>5</sup> "Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?" <sup>6</sup> (He said this not because he cared about the poor, but because he was a thief; he kept the common purse and used to steal what was put into it.) <sup>7</sup> Jesus said, "Leave her alone. She bought it so that she might keep it for the day of my burial. <sup>8</sup> You always have the poor with you, but you do not always have me."

<sup>9</sup> When the great crowd of the Jews learned that he was there, they came not only because of Jesus but also to see Lazarus, whom he had raised from the dead. <sup>10</sup> So the chief priests planned to put Lazarus to death as well, <sup>11</sup> since it was on account of him that many of the Jews were deserting and were believing in Jesus.

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

We are one week away from Palm Sunday, when Jesus entered Jerusalem in triumph but also in full knowledge that he was entering the city in order to face death. Prior to this story in John, which is slightly different in the other gospels, there are a series of events that have led to this strange anointing in Bethany. So let me give you some background here. Jesus has been preaching and healing all across Galilee. He has had earlier confrontations with the Pharisees, and he has been to Jerusalem before, during the Festival of Dedication, that we call Hanukkah.

In that earlier visit to Jerusalem, "the Jews" had gathered around him and asked him to state clearly whether he was the Messiah. Jesus' response was that he had already told them that he was the Messiah, but they hadn't believed him, because

they did not belong to his sheep. Well, that's what we would call "fightin words" where I come from. If those Jews were not the "in crowd," who was? That statement set off such anger that they tried to arrest him and then stone Jesus to death, because he was making himself out to be God." But we read that perfume "he escaped from their hands." So Jesus' visit to Jerusalem at Hanukkah had not gone well!

After this experience, Jesus went across the Jordan, and crowds came to him there and believed in him. But while he was there, he received word from Mary and Martha that their brother Lazarus was ill. We know that story – how Jesus delayed until Lazarus had been dead four days, but he raised him from the dead.

Now the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus was in Bethany – only about 2 miles away from Jerusalem. So some of the Jews who had seen this miraculous resurrection had gone back to Jerusalem and reported to the Pharisees what had just happened. We're told in chapter 11 of John that the chief priests and Pharisees called a meeting of the council and were concerned that if Jesus were allowed to continue his ministry, the Romans would come and destroy both the temple and the nation. The Jewish rulers issued what we would call today an APB – all points bulletin – so that they could find Jesus and arrest him. So Jesus, now an outlaw of sorts, had retreated to a town called Ephraim some distance away. You can imagine how Jesus would feel about returning to Jerusalem.

But the time of Passover was coming. Passover was a time when the Jews would gather from all across the country to travel to Jerusalem to purify themselves and participate in high holy day services. Many of Jesus' followers went up to the city and began to ask themselves if Jesus would dare to come to the city again.

Now Jesus knew what was going to happen if he came to Jerusalem, but there was no way that he was going to avoid that destiny. And now we come to our story. On his way, Jesus stops first at Bethany for a meal with his beloved friends, Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. And there Mary, who has already shown us that she reacts to Jesus with emotion rather than cool logic, anoints Jesus feet. Now I know you are aware that the other gospels have different women, different places, and different types of anointing than this story. So I'll go ahead and tell you about those versions so you don't sit here and look for them in your pew Bibles instead of listening to the rest of my sermon! In Matthew and Mark, Jesus is at the home of Simon the leper and an unnamed woman pours expensive perfume on his head while he is eating. In Luke, Jesus is eating at a Pharisee's house and a woman "of the city, who was a sinner" wets Jesus' feet with her tears, wipes them with her hair, kisses them, and anoints them with expensive ointment.

So here, it's Mary who anoints Jesus' feet with expensive perfume and wipes them with her hair. Two stories have women anointing Jesus' head, and two stories have women anointing Jesus' feet, and in all four he was at table, eating – twice with Simon the leper, once with a Pharisee, and once at the home of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus. In three of the stories, there is outrage that the perfume was so expensive – a year's worth of average labor in cost. Money that could have been given to the poor, if the perfume had been sold. Luke, interestingly enough, doesn't mention the expense – the problem the Pharisee has in that story is that Jesus let this "unacceptable" sort of woman, a "sinner" touch him. In all four, however, the act is in some way unacceptable.

Anointing Jesus' head and feet are two different types of actions. When we think of anointing one's head, we think of kingship or priestly ordination. Those who are being placed in high positions in society at that time were anointed with oil on their heads. Think Saul or David. But anointing feet is a different matter. Usually a guest was offered water to wash one's feet upon arrival, since they were dusty from the road. But perfume was never used to clean feet. And on top of that, Mary uses her hair, not a clean towel, to wipe the feet. So let's look at the text for a clue about that. First of all, verse 3 says that "the house was filled with the fragrance of the perfume." This foot washing doesn't just clean Jesus' feet, it creates an entire atmosphere of wonderful aroma. The house smells like the temple, where costly perfumes are offered in sacrifice. This act creates a holy place, the last place in Jesus' life where he is free to be an honored guest. The holy person who has brought Lazarus back to life is honored as the holy one. And he is honored with expensive perfume and the intimacy of feet wiped with the hair of someone who loves him dearly. No, Martha would not have done that – if she'd poured perfume on his feet, she would have used a clean towel, and she maybe wouldn't have even used the whole bottle!

But this is not Martha, who we are told in verse 2 served the dinner. This is Mary, who has sat at Jesus' feet before, enraptured by his words and presence. This is Mary, who acts with her heart, not her mind. It is extravagance, pure extravagance. Extravagance born out of her love for this special teacher and healer and holy man. And throughout the gospel of John, there are stories of extravagance – Jesus turns 180 gallons of water into wine, he feeds 5000 hungry people with hardly anything and has 12 baskets of food left over. After his death, when he appears to Peter and finds out he's fished all night and caught nothing,

he has Peter throw the net to the other side of the boat and immediately 153 large fish jump into it. There is abundance and extravagant love whenever Jesus is present. And Mary returns that extravagance – with costly perfume and a gift of her own hair as a towel. That is as close as she can get physically to this man, but it is physical intimacy in humility – it is cleaning of feet. And later Jesus washes his own disciples' feet at the Passover meal. More extravagant, intimate, humble love.

Jesus explains what she's done in verse 7, after Judas complains about the expense. And we get a first glimpse of the Judas who is to come in the following week – a betrayer. Jesus explains that Mary has bought the perfume for his burial. The disciples can use money to help the poor any time, but they will not have him much longer. What is interesting is that Mary anoints him for burial before he has died. This is a topsy turvy kind of thing, especially when we look at the resurrection of Lazarus. Lazarus had surely been anointed for burial after his death, and yet he was raised from that death back to life. And here Mary anoints Jesus before death, before there is any indication that anyone other than Jesus believes he's going to be murdered. Why does she do that? Does she have a premonition that Jesus is to die in a week? Is it just an outpouring of love with the most precious gift she can give him? We never know. We only know that Jesus believes her act to be one of grace and love and preparation for death, and he chastises Judas for pitching a fit about it.

Raising Lazarus from the dead has caused further problems for Jesus. It has set the Jewish authorities into action against him – and not just further criticism of his ministry, and not just an APB to turn him in for arrest, but now to murder him.

Too many people have come to believe that Jesus is the Messiah, or at least a miracle healer. He has become dangerous to the Jewish authorities because he has crossed a line from prophecy to blasphemy with his statement that he is the son of God, and he has become dangerous to the Roman authorities because he is causing large, unruly crowds to gather. And we read in verses 9-11 that a great crowd comes to see both Jesus and Lazarus, this miracle man who has come back from the dead. So now the Jewish authorities decide they must also kill Lazarus, since he's also causing Jews to become believers in Jesus. Giving life is going to cause death.

What absolute irony here – the man who died and was resurrected is to be killed again, and the man who performed the resurrection, who we know will in fact also be resurrected, is to die. Topsy turvy deaths and resurrections. The world is in chaos at this moment. Who is this man who has caused all this turmoil, who has healed all these people who should not have been healable? Who has brought a dead man back to life, four days after he was laid in a tomb? Who keeps saying he is “the resurrection and the life?” Who is this man who tells the people around him that he will give them eternal life, and they will never perish? He tells them who he is but it doesn't make sense to the crowd. He says who he is over and over – he even says “the Father and I are one.” And that gets him into such trouble that he almost gets stoned to death the first time he's in Jerusalem, and now it promises death if he returns there.

So here we are, the day before Jesus enters Jerusalem on a colt, on the Sunday before Palm Sunday, when we all wave our palm branches celebrating this triumph. He's on his way. He's almost there. He has just been anointed with

expensive perfume and his feet wiped with the intimacy of a woman's hair. So now what? How does Jesus go on to a city and a destiny that promises torment and death? I suggest we look back at Isaiah 43, the passage we read earlier. Because these words are the comfort that Jesus needs right at this point – when he is leaving his ministry to enter the city of his death. Isaiah says:

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;

I have called you by name, you are mine.

<sup>2</sup>When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;

and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;

when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,

and the flame shall not consume you.

<sup>3</sup>For I am the LORD your God,

the Holy One of Israel, your Savior.

<sup>19</sup>I am about to do a new thing;

now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?

I will make a way in the wilderness

and rivers in the desert.

Jesus would have known these words, and they would have been comfort to him, as they are comfort to us. Regardless of what we are about to face, God tells us not to fear, because we are his. God will be with us. God will make a way. Jesus knows this. So Jesus leaves the table of fellowship, the house of friendship, the love of Mary, Martha, and Lazarus, the home for someone who had no home, and sets out for Jerusalem. But he does so having been anointed with fragrant perfume, a gift of extravagant love. It's really the only thing that anyone could



have given him to prepare him for that journey. He has been comforted by friends, and he goes knowing that God will comfort him along the way.

Next Sunday we will revisit that triumphant entry, and then begin a week of reflection as we move toward the moment that Mary anointed Jesus for – the cross. As we do that, we must remember love's extravagance, because it not only gave Jesus courage to take that last journey, but it gives us courage to go on every day. Love's extravagance is God's gift to us as well. Amen.